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STATE PARK

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## THE PARK

Matthiessen State Park, an area of dells and stone formations, is 2 miles southwest of Starved Rock State Park in LaSalle County. The 175-acre park was bought and developed near the close of the nineteenth century by the late F. W. Matthiessen, a prominent LaSalle industrialist and philanthropist. His heirs gave the area to the state, who opened the park to the public on May 1, 1943.

## HISTORY

**Indian and French:** This part of Illinois which includes the Matthiessen State Park was once the home of the powerful Illini confederation of Indians.

As far as is known, the first white men to come to this country were the French explorer, Louis Jolliet; the missionary, Father Jacques Marquette; and five French companions in 1673. They came into Illinois at what is now Pere Marquette State Park where the Illinois River flows into the mighty Mississippi. Coming up the Illinois River, they stopped for three days several miles north of the village of Indians located at what is now Matthiessen State Park. They were warmly greeted at the Indian village of La Vantum, later called Kaskaskia and now the site of the town of Utica.

Father Marquette promised to return, but ill health prevented this until March of 1675. He founded a mission at the village but feeling his days were coming to an end he soon left. He died in May while on his way to Mackinac. Jolliet had in the meantime hastened his return to make his report of his discoveries to the Governor of Quebec, but the French dallied with their plans for colonization.

Dreams of French domination brought Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, to the Illinois country in November of 1679. After exploring the country and meeting with many hardships, he built Fort St. Louis on the top of what is now known as Starved Rock. This was the most westerly of the French forts built to keep the English colonists east of the Allegheny Mountains.

Thousands of Indians were gathered in the village near the fort and Cavelier became the head of a feudal type of government. The fort also became a place of trade between the Indians and the French.

After many forays by incoming Iroquois Indians, the Illini tribes left. The fort was abandoned in 1702.

## NATURAL SCENE

**Geological Formations:** In the rock glens, the geological student can read the rock history well back into the Paleozoic era. At Matthiessen State Park both the St. Peter sandstone and the overlying Platteville limestone, formations which in most of Illinois occur at considerable depth, are brought to the surface along the great upfold known as the La Salle anticline. It is in these formations that the principal canyon, a beautiful gorge nearly 200 feet deep and 50 to 150 feet wide, has been mainly eroded as part of the Vermilion River valley.

These old formations are overlain by much younger formations, consisting of beds of sandstone, shale, clay, coal and limestone belonging to the Pennsylvania or "Coal Measures" system. They underlie all the upland areas in the park and are exposed along the top of the canyon walls at some places, especially in the vicinity of Arch Bridge. The coal has been mined at some places in the park and at many places around it.

Around the canyon the rocks are covered by a stony clay or till that was left when the huge ice sheets or glaciers that once spread over northern Illinois from Canada melted away. The meltwaters from these glaciers helped to erode the valley of the Vermilion River and the tributary canyons.

The St. Peter sandstone carries much water and is therefore an important source of water for industrial and municipal purposes in northern Illinois. In Matthiessen State Park some of the water in the sandstone seeps out along the canyon walls and, as it evaporates, the minerals it carries in solution are left as deposits of brilliant color on the rocks. In the park there are also several min-





eral springs, differing considerably in composition. These mineral springs and deposits were probably the lure which in older days made this locality particularly attractive to deer.

**Flora:** The flora of Matthiessen State Park is most interesting because of the unusual preservation of what was once common to Illinois.

On damp walls and in the dark recesses of canyons are thick carpets of velvety mosses and liverworts. Ferns grow luxuriantly where there is rich soil and sufficient moisture. The park has many indigenous trees of which the most common are the Black, White, Red and Bur Oaks, Black and Blue Ash, Ironwood, Maple, Aspen, Red Mulberry, Elm and Hickory, interspersed with Sassafras, Witch Hazel, Alder, Cedar, Yew, Sumac, Shadbush and a number of Redbuds. Catbriar, Poison Ivy and Honeysuckle are found in dense thickets. Among the vines is Bittersweet while Virginia Creeper is found hanging 30 feet from its perch on a canyon wall:

Matthiessen State Park is a paradise for the lover of flowers. In the lower moist areas one finds in

the spring Hepatica, Wild Geranium, Dutchman's Breeches and Bloodroot. Slopes are thick with Trillium. Other interesting plants are Solomon's Seal, Spikenard, White Baneberry and the rarer Jacob's Ladder. Later in the season are Violets, Adder's Tongue, Turtle Head, Hibiscus, Mallow and several kinds of Anemones. Clinging precariously to cliff crevices are delicate Harebells. A number of native orchids may be found by the persistent nature student. Asters and Goldenrod add to the rich fall coloring at the park.

**Wildlife:** Many small animals make their home in the park. There are rabbits, raccoons, opossums, muskrats, moles and field mice, and many flying, gray and fox squirrels. Wild deer are to be seen occasionally, from herds that are now native to most portions of Illinois.

Matthiessen State Park is an ideal spot in which to study birds. Over 50 varieties may be easily counted in the park. The natural coverage and fine protection afforded in this nature area also attract many of less common species.



## FACILITIES

**Picnicking:** There are two picnic areas with tables and outdoor stoves. Playground equipment and drinking water are available.

**Concession Stand:** A variety of items, including beverages and sandwiches, may be purchased.

**Trails:** There are two main trails, Glenview and Serpentine, that wind through the park for about 7 miles each. Twelve minor trails may also be hiked.

**Summer Interpretive Program:** The park interpreter conducts recreational activities designed to provide nature experience for the visitor.

## FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

Admittance will not be granted groups of 25 or more persons to any state park or conservation area unless permission from the park ranger has been secured to use the facilities. It is also required that groups of minors have adequate supervision and that at least one responsible adult accompany each group not exceeding 15 minors. All pets must be on a leash.

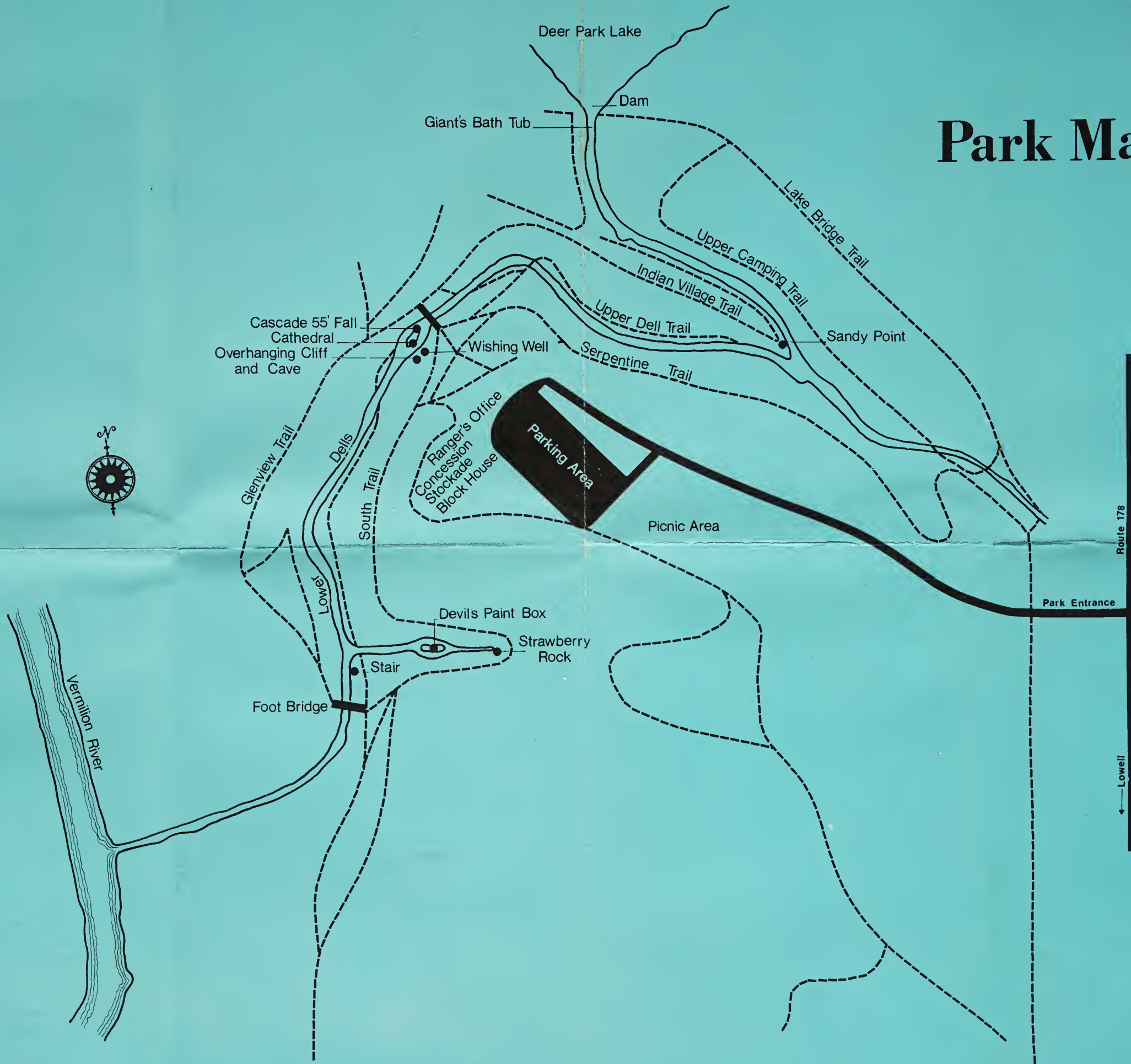
Numerous state parks and memorials are within easy access of every part of the state. Lodges, cabins and dining rooms are important features of Illinois Beach, Starved Rock, Pere Marquette, White Pines Forest and Giant City. Reservations for lodging should be made with lodge managers.

All state parks are open the year round. When weather conditions necessitate the closing of park roads during freezing and thawing periods, access to park facilities is by foot only.

For more details about this site, contact Ranger, Box 381, Utica, Illinois 61373. Phone 815/883-8607. For more information on other Illinois sites, write the Department of Conservation, Information/Education Section, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.



# Park Map



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